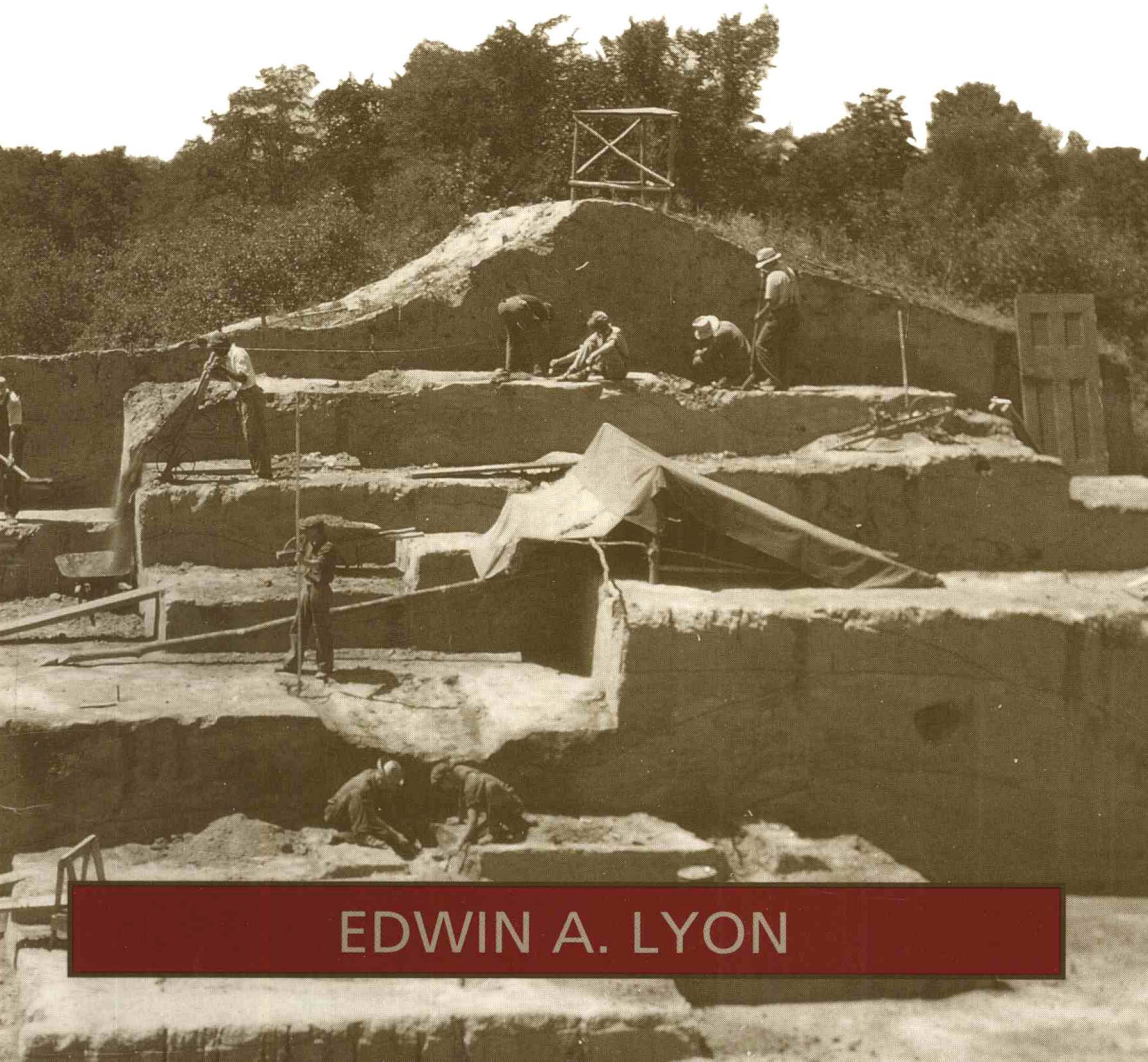
A NEW DEAL FOR SOUTHEASTERN ARCHAEOLOGY



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To my mother and the memory of my father

Preface

THIS BOOK IS a history of New Deal archaeology in the American Southeast. The depression of the 1930s created a unique opportunity for archaeologists, with consequences still felt today. Archaeologists often use the term "WPA archaeology" to describe this period in the history of American archaeology. Unfortunately this usage obscures the true nature of federal archaeology in the depression. New Deal archaeology was a complex system of interrelated projects of the Federal Emergency Relief Administration (FERA), Civil Works Administration (CWA), Works Progress Administration (WPA), Tennessee Valley Authority (TVA), National Park Service (NPS), and Smithsonian Institution working with museums and universities in a number of states. Despite efforts at coordination of these projects, New Deal archaeology never was effectively coordinated and managed as a national program.

The focus of this book is on the Southeast. Major New Deal archaeological projects were active in other sections of the country including the Southwest, the Great Plains, Rocky Mountain states, Midwest, and Northeast. But New Deal archaeology as a whole is difficult to understand because North American archaeology varies regionally. As the historian of anthropology Curtis Hinsley has noted about archaeology in the United States, "North American work, for complex historical reasons, has deep local and regional roots," and "different parts of the country have come to archaeological attention or prominence at successive stages of national political-economic growth and of professional growth of archaeology." Hinsley is aware of the problems of a regional approach in the history of archaeology but nevertheless recognizes that "geographical locus has always been a critical factor in archaeology, and it is equally so in writing the history of archaeology."[1] This is certainly true in the case of the Southeast. As Louisiana archaeologist Jon Gibson has pointed out, "Southern archaeology has always been slightly out of kilter with American archaeological development in general."[2]

The Southeast began to be treated as an archaeological unit before the 1930s, but during that decade it became a real focus of archaeological interest, culminating in the creation of the Southeastern Archaeological Conference (SEAC) in 1938. This concentration on the Southeast continues and was very evident to me during the last SEAC meeting I attended in the fall of 1992. But we should realize

that there has never been a consensus about the boundaries of the Southeast, and the Southeast discussed in this book is certainly open to question. My "Southeast" includes New Deal archaeological projects in Florida, Georgia, North Carolina, Alabama, Tennessee, Kentucky, Louisiana, Mississippi, Arkansas, and east Texas. My inclusion of border areas in this study is designed to make the book as useful to contemporary archaeologists as possible.

This book has been formed out of my unique experience over more years than I care to think about. I never intended to become an archaeologist, and the archaeologists in my office would tell you that I have been successful. Experience digging in Louisiana heat as an undergraduate and working in the LSU museum washing pottery, typing site records, and repackaging part of the WPA collection from its original shoe boxes into more modern containers convinced me that archaeology was not for me. My experience was similar to that of the ethnologist John R. Swanton, who in the 1890s did archaeology "long enough to enjoy the sound of noon whistles and appreciate the taste of cold spring water" and then went into ethnology.[3] I also went into ethnology for my M.A., and then history, but I have never been able to escape archaeology.

I became interested in the subject of this study some years ago listening to Bill Haag's stories about his experience in CWA, TVA, and WPA archaeology in Tennessee, Alabama, and Kentucky. I began to work formally on the subject when I wrote a paper on Louisiana WPA archaeology for Burl Noggle's seminar at LSU on American history of the 1930s. My dissertation, completed in 1982, was an effort of a historian with a background in anthropology and archaeology but suffering from many deficiencies. I am grateful to the historians on my dissertation committee for supporting my work in an area foreign to them. Burl Noggle served as my major professor, and John Loos, Robert Becker, and David Lindenfeld were on my committee. Only Haag understood the archaeology, but he did not get to read it until much later. It was an ideal committee.

Late in 1985 my job as historian for the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers in the New Orleans District was abolished, and I took a position as an "archaeologist" working in cultural resources management (CRM) and historic preservation. This experience has been crucial in creating the book in this form. While always working toward my goal never to get mud on my boots, I now know firsthand the difficulties of survey, the expense of data recovery, and the problems of report preparation. I have struggled with a bureaucracy not very different from the federal agencies of the depression. This experience has enabled me to understand more clearly the problems of archaeologists in the 1930s. I now understand what William Webb, an important WPA and TVA archaeologist, meant when he wrote about New Deal archaeology: "Regulations, constraints, limitations, difficulties innumerable all conspired to make this work what it was. It was never possible to do what was best to do at the most propitious time or in a way most satisfactory to science. It

was always the case of working in a hurry, under adverse conditions, in the face of many limitations and restrictions."[4]

My daily contacts with federal, contract, and academic archaeologists and involvement in a number of archaeological projects has made clear to me that New Deal archaeology in the Southeast was a major formative experience in the development of professional archaeology in the post–World War II period. At the same time I also understand how different the archaeology of the depression was from what we do now. Archaeologists now devote much more attention to minute examinations of more limited areas of smaller sites than did New Deal archaeologists. It is still difficult for me to grasp the size and scale of some of the relief, salvage, and preservation projects of the depression. The large numbers of laborers available at some of the major New Deal sites allowed much more extensive excavation than would be possible today in our CRM data recovery projects. As a result major New Deal excavations were vastly larger than many of our contemporary projects. At Hiwassee Island, for example, a salvage project in the Chickamauga Basin in eastern Tennessee, excavation of a village and substructure mounds uncovered an area of more than 33,000 square feet. In addition, small midden areas and conoidal burial mounds were excavated. Entire mounds were completely excavated at many sites. At the Wright Mounds in Kentucky forty men removed more than 13,000 cubic yards of earth in nineteen months. Trenching is another impressive component of New Deal projects. Huge trenches were run for incredible distances. At the Greenhouse site in Louisiana archaeologists excavated a 5-foot-wide trench in 3-inch levels for 680 feet. It proved so successful that they dug four other trenches through the site.

I hope that both archaeologists and historians will read this book. The archaeologist will approach the book in a very different way than the historian. Archaeologists use the data produced by New Deal archaeologists, they have heard stories told by the archaeologists, and they have formed definite opinions about New Deal archaeology. They will learn about previously buried archaeological projects and the overall structure and context of New Deal archaeology. For historians the book may be useful in another way. A number of studies of the WPA arts program have made historians aware of the art, music, theatre, writers, and historical records surveys. But these projects are not completely representative of the great variety of WPA projects. Archaeology was not only organized very differently from other WPA projects but was unique because it involved the National Park Service, Tennessee Valley Authority, and the Smithsonian Institution.[5]

This book would not have been possible without the help of many archaeologists, historians, and archivists. During my years as a federal "archaeologist" I have learned a great deal from a number of my colleagues. Michael Stout, in particular, helped me learn enough to survive in CRM. Over the many years I have worked on this book I have been assisted by archivists, librarians, and archaeologists ser-

ving as custodians of the documentation of New Deal archaeology in the Southeast. I am especially grateful to James Glenn of the National Anthropological Archives and his colleagues. A number of archaeologists and historians have read chapters of this book, among them James B. Griffin, Gordon Willey, Lynne Sullivan, Mary Lucas Powell, and Mark Barnes. Edwin Bearss and Barry Mackintosh, chief historian and bureau historian of the National Park Service, respectively, read the discussion of the NPS. Bill Haag and an anonymous reviewer for the University of Alabama Press read the entire manuscript and offered many useful suggestions. Jefferson Chapman, Sylvia Flowers, William Haag, John Hall, Vernon J. Knight, Robert Neuman, Joan Exnicios, and Mary Lucas Powell helped with the illustrations. Judith Knight pushed me for many years to complete the manuscript and provided more help than an author has any right to expect from an editor. Anders Thompson copyedited the manuscript. All readers should be as grateful to him as I am. I thank all for their help.

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Contents

Illustrations

Maps

Figures

Prologue

IN JANUARY OF 1993 I visited the Marksville site in Louisiana. Today the site is a state park, the Marksville State Commemorative Area, with a museum that opened in 1950. As I walked through the park trying to understand the mounds, the embankment around the site, and its relationship to Old River at the rear of the park, I thought about the site in 1933. Excavation at this site was the beginning of New Deal archaeology sixty years ago.

In 1933 Marksville was very different. The Smithsonian Institution had been interested in archaeology in Louisiana for some time. Edward F. Neild, an architect in Shreveport, corresponded with Smithsonian archaeologists about Hopewell sites in Louisiana. He had found Hopewell type sherds at Moncla Ferry on the Red River near Marksville. Alexander Wetmore of the Smithsonian planned for Frank Setzler to visit sites in Louisiana after a Texas trip when Neild was to show him Hopewell sites in north Louisiana.[1] "Both Setzler and I," Neil Judd wrote, "are tremendously interested in this Hopewell influence in the South. It may be that in your vicinity we shall yet find the information to solve the problem of this unknown, but brilliant, people whose remains in Ohio have prompted so many unanswerable questions."[2] Setzler later visited Marksville and other sites in the spring.

As local amateurs began to be interested in restoration of the mounds, Setzler and Judd began to worry that the site would be destroyed by its restorers. Judd recommended to Neild that "restoration should follow careful examination of what now remains and in no case should it be left to the imagination of one unfamiliar with Indian mounds and especially those at Marksville."[3]

The town of Marksville purchased the site and planned to convert it into a park and recreation center using Federal Emergency Relief Administration funds. Work had started on a swimming pool before local people interested in archaeology persuaded the authorities in charge of the project to allow excavation and restoration under the direction of the Smithsonian.[4] The city council and the local FERA then requested that the Smithsonian send a representative to supervise excavation and restoration of the site.[5] Frank M. Setzler, assistant curator of archaeology at the United States National Museum of the Smithsonian Institution, arrived in late August of 1933 and remained until November. Setzler had studied at Ohio State University from 1924 to 1927 while he worked as an assistant field director at the Ohio

Fig. 1. Mound 4 at Marksville, Louisiana, 1993 (*Courtesy of Joan M. Exnicios*)

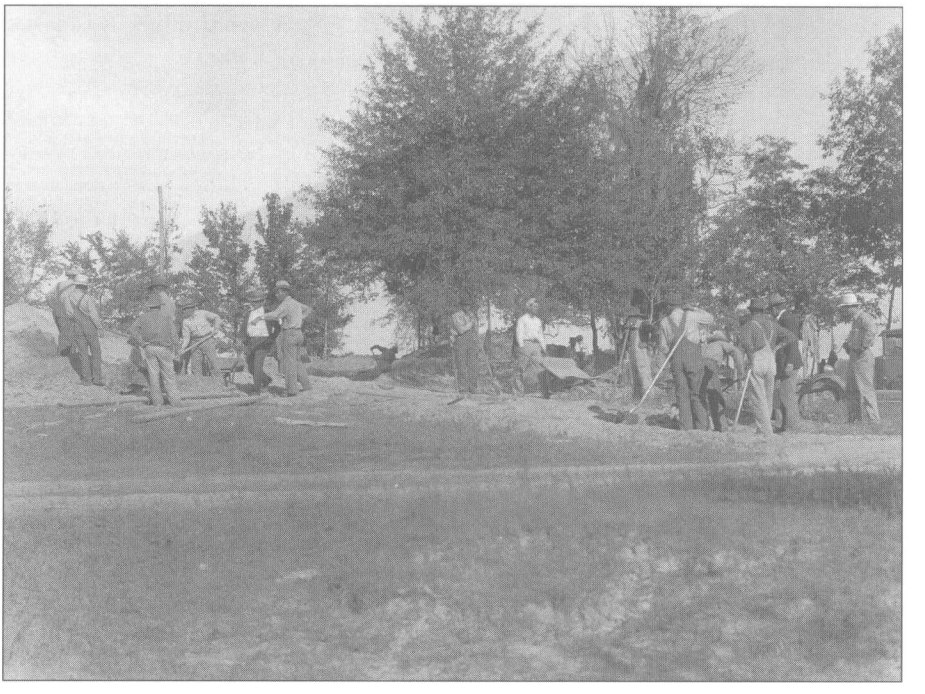

Fig. 2. FERA excavation of Mound 4 at Marksville, 1933 (*Courtesy of Museum of Natural Sciences, Louisiana State University*)

Fig. 3. Excavation of semi-subterranean house at Marksville, 1933 (*Courtesy of Museum of Natural Sciences, Louisiana State University*)

State Museum. He later was a graduate student in anthropology at the University of Chicago and worked as an Indiana state archaeologist.[6] His assistant, James A. Ford, aided in the excavation while Setzler was at the site and took charge for the month of November after Setzler left. Ford had graduated from high school in Clinton, Mississippi, in 1927 and went to work for the Mississippi Department of Archives and History, where he worked with Moreau B. Chambers digging mounds. According to Gordon Willey, "Ford and Chambers spent three summers at this task of officially sponsored 'pothunting,' traveling from site to site by team and wagon."[7] In 1930 Henry B. Collins, Jr., of the Smithsonian Institution offered Ford the job of field assistant on an Alaskan field trip. Ford returned to Alaska for eighteen months beginning in the summer of 1931. In 1933 he received a grant from the National Research Council for archaeological investigations in Mississippi and Louisiana.[8]

It was a new experience for Setzler and Ford to supervise a crew of more than one hundred laborers in the excavation of three mounds and village areas.[9] The site is surrounded by an earthwork from three to seven feet high that was probably built for ceremonial purposes. Near the museum building is Mound 4, a conical burial

mound 20 feet high dug into by Gerard Fowke of the Smithsonian in 1926. Fowke had only disturbed part of the mound, and Setzler returned to it in 1933.[10] The current mound was reconstructed in 1933 and now is surrounded by a fence to keep off visitors. Setzler and Ford dug into Mound 5, which was about 3 feet high and 40 feet in diameter, but few records survive. Mound 6, a truncated mound about 13 feet high, was the site of extensive digging but the work is documented today only by a few photographs. Setzler and Ford also placed at least five trenches through the village area. In addition to a number of burials in Mound 4 they recovered artifacts including Marksville pottery, pipes, projectile points, and stone knives. A final report on the project was never published—a common occurrence in many of the later New Deal archaeological projects. Few records of the project survive.

Setzler finished the excavation with a new awareness that the Hopewell culture extended into the Southeast. At first, he resisted the heretical idea that a variant of Hopewell existed in the Southeast. According to Henry Collins, it took Setzler's experience in Louisiana to convince him of the importance of the Hopewell-southeastern relationship.[11] Ford already had seen a relation between some Mississippian sherds and Hopewell, and Collins had tried to convince Setzler of the presence of Hopewell in the South.[12] Finally, Setzler admitted that "the data obtained give definite proof that the prehistoric Indians who lived and built the mounds on this site were closely allied in their culture-phase to those known as the Hopewell in the northern Mississippi Valley."[13]

This project would demonstrate to skeptical archaeologists that archaeology was possible using large crews of relief laborers. The large Civil Works Administration relief archaeology projects during the winter of 1933–1934 emerged directly from this experience.

Southeastern Archaeology before the Depression

PREHISTORIC ARCHAEOLOGY in the United States developed during the twentieth century as one of four components of the discipline of anthropology: ethnology, physical anthropology, linguistics, and archaeology. Within anthropology, ethnology was the dominant force before the 1930s. Archaeology as it was practiced in the early twentieth century was of little value to many anthropologists. A few archaeologists had done good work, but the typical archaeologist, in the words of J. Alden Mason, "was a congenital antiquarian, attracted to the ancient, the rare, the spectacular."[1] Franz Boas, the most important figure in American anthropology in the early twentieth century, was aware that archaeology could contribute to anthropology, but was unimpressed with archaeologists. According to Mason, "A cynical remark attributed to him, even if apocryphal, probably expresses his attitude: 'If a man finds a pot, he is an archeologist; if two, a great archeologist; three, a renowned archeologist!' "[2]

Archaeology had little to offer at that time to anthropologists interested in understanding the history of Native Americans. As Alfred Kroeber pointed out, "Incredible as it may now seem, by 1915–25 so little time perspective had been achieved in archaeology that Wissler and I, in trying to reconstruct the native American past, could then actually infer more from the distributions and typology of ethnographic data than from the archaeologists' determinations. Our inferences were not too exact, but they were broader than those from excavations."[3] Not only lack of archaeological knowledge but the refusal of physical anthropologists to recognize the presence of humans in the New World before the very recent past limited the importance of archaeology in anthropology. Failure to recognize time depth in eastern North America led to a short prehistoric chronology with changes occurring rapidly as the result of movement of population or spread of cultural traits by diffusion.

This domination of archaeology by ethnology benefited archaeology by expanding archaeologists' interests in broader anthropological questions but also limited the development of the field. Boas and his followers opposed any role for cultural evolutionism in anthropology leading to emphasis on cultural relativism and historical particularism. This opposition to cultural evolutionism effectively prevented concern with broader issues of change in Native American cultures.[4] As Gordon Willey and Jeremy Sabloff point out, "The distrust of evolutionary think-